

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S

**Their Eyes Were
Watching God**



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



THE **BIG
READ**

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S

Their Eyes Were Watching God

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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six nonprofit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 25 years.

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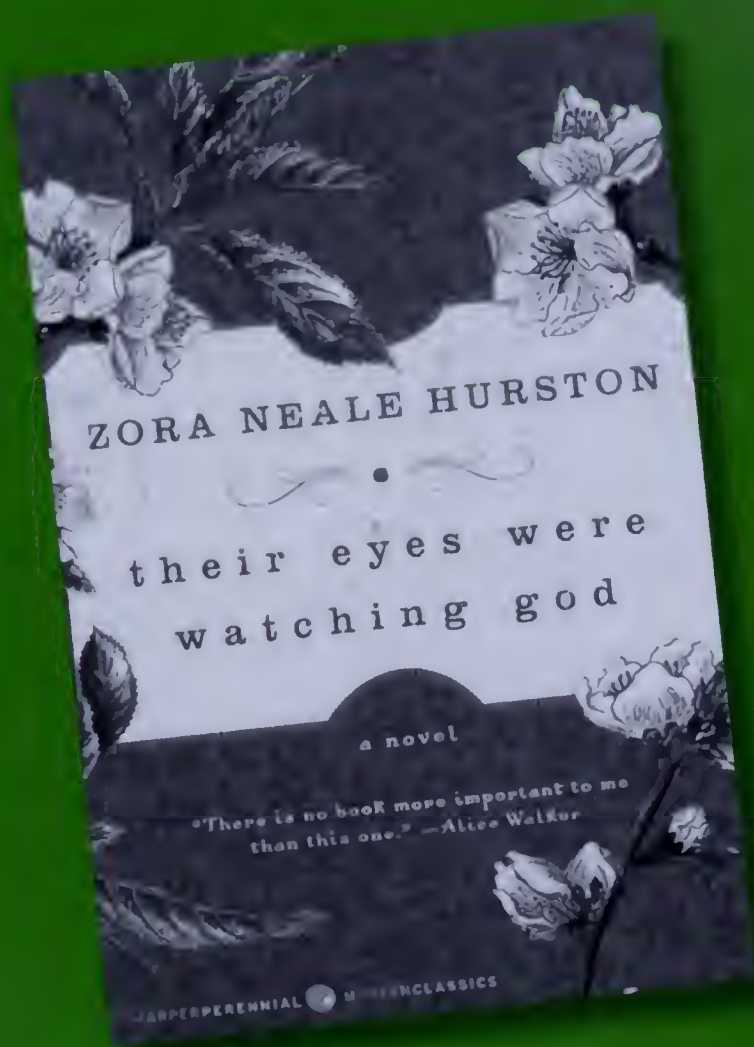
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“It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard... It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell.”

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON
from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*



Introduction

Welcome to The Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture. The Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become lifelong readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Zora Neale Hurston's classic novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Each lesson has four sections: a thematic focus, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, The Big Read CD presents firsthand accounts of why Hurston's novel remains so compelling seven decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, The Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 1. Read Handout One and Reader's Guide essays. Write a short life story.

Homework: Read Chapter 1 (pp. 1–7).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 2. Listen to music on the www.neajazzintheschools.org Web site. Read Reader's Guide essays and Handout Two.

Homework: Read Chapters 2–3 (pp. 8–25).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Compare the omniscient narrator and the heroine's narration. Explore how audience affects the story. Tell a story from the point of view of a secondary character.

Homework: Read Chapter 4 (pp. 26–33).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Explore Janie's relationship to nature. Introduce foil.

Homework: Read Chapters 5–6 (pp. 34–75).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Document figurative language used in first six chapters. Follow a repeated image.

Homework: Read Chapters 7–9 (pp. 76–93).

* Page numbers refer to the HarperCollins 1990 edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 2. Explore symbols of the pear tree, the street lamp, and the mule.

Homework: Read Chapters 10–12 (pp. 94–115).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 1. Map Janie's development as a young woman. Write on freedom and the "maiden language."

Homework: Read Chapters 13–16 (pp. 116–146).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Chart a timeline of the story. Watch a segment of the film of the novel. Write a new conclusion.

Homework: Read Chapters 17–20 (pp. 147–193).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Develop an interpretation based on a theme: a woman's voice, race, or religion.

Homework: Read the Afterword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Work on essay.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel and the voice of a generation. Examine qualities that make Hurston's novel successful. Peer review paper outlines or drafts.

Homework: Essay due next class period.

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston infuses the setting, characters, and dialogue of the novel with southern folklore and anthropological research. Also, events in the novel mirror some circumstances and events in her life. Hurston's bold statement, "I love myself when I am laughing and then again when I am looking mean and impressive," captures the defiant confidence we encounter in the maturing main character, Janie Mae Crawford.

?? Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 1 (16 minutes). Students will take notes as they listen. Students will present the three most important things they learned from the CD. Discuss Carla Kaplan's argument that Hurston "depicted black difference."

Read Handout One aloud in class. Copy Reader's Guide essays, "Zora Neale Hurston, 1891–1960" (pp. 4–6), "Hurston and Her Other Works" (pp. 12–13), and "Hurston's Death ... and Resurrection" (pp. 10–11). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. Groups will present what they learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.



Writing Exercise

Write an essay about a significant event or moment that changed your view of the world. Describe your experience through images or word pictures.



Homework

Read Chapter 1 (pp. 1–7). Why would Hurston use Southern black idiom to tell her story? Ask students to think about Kaplan's comment as they read.

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Jazz Age of the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance marked the artistic, political, and cultural birth of the “New Negro” in literature and art. This renaissance relied upon its deep roots, including the oral traditions of storytelling and folktales. These traditions corresponded to a variety of musical styles: Negro spirituals, blues, and jazz. In Hurston’s prose, the old and new converged into the dynamic, vibrant language of Janie, Pheoby, and the Eatonville townspeople.



Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 2 (13 minutes). After listening to the first two tracks of the CD, your students should be able to identify several revolutionary aspects of the novel. How is this evident as early as Chapter 1? What aspects of the novel derive from a tradition of oral storytelling?

Go to NEA’s Jazz in the Schools Web site at www.neajazzintheschools.org. Go to Lesson 2 and click on “Listen.” Play clips of music from the 1930s. Ask students to take notes as they listen and to identify patterns in the music. Can your students articulate the similarities between the rhythms of the novel and the jazz styles of the 1930s?



Writing Exercise

Read the Reader’s Guide essays “Harlem Renaissance: The Era” (pp. 7–8), “Harlem Renaissance: Hurston’s Circle” (p. 9), and Handout Two in the Teacher’s Guide. Using these essays, students should write a few paragraphs about Hurston’s relationship to her era.



Homework

Read Chapters 2–3 (pp. 8–25). Ask students to consider how Janie’s point of view affects the way this story is told. Why does she begin her narrative with the pear tree? How is Janie’s growth reflected in the way the story is told?

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third-person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with an unidentified third-person narrator who remains outside the story. This anonymous, omniscient narrator immediately creates interest by declaring: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead.” The first page also contains one of several allusions to the book’s title: “the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment;” however, the narration changes when Janie tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson.



Discussion Activities

How can an omniscient narrator tell the story at the same time that the novel’s heroine, Janie, also tells her story? Do these voices reflect different parts of Janie, or does the omniscient narrator reveal another force in Janie’s universe?

Janie is judged throughout the novel. In the first chapter, who judges her, and why? How does Janie respond?

Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does our audience (especially friends) affect what we reveal or conceal?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one secondary character who has appeared so far: Nanny, Logan, Pheoby, the Eatonville townspeople, Johnny Taylor, or Janie’s mother and rewrite the novel’s beginning from the perspective of this character. Use this exercise to reflect on how a story can be told from multiple perspectives. Why did Hurston choose Janie as the heroine instead of another character? Ask students to provide a dramatic presentation of the re-told story.



Homework

Read Chapter 4 (pp. 26–33). Five significant characters have been introduced: Janie, Pheoby, Nanny, Logan, and Joe. Have students list what motivates each of these characters.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.



Discussion Activities

How do Logan and Joe reveal different sides of Janie? What are their motivations? To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two attributes related?



Writing Exercise

In Chapter 3, our protagonist, Janie, wanders back and forth to the pear tree, “wondering and thinking” as she tries to adjust to her arranged marriage. She struggles with words, inheriting a “deepness” from her Nanny. Although Janie fails to find any “bloom” in this marriage, she discovers that “she knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind.” Like her Nanny, Janie’s “basin of mind” finds words in the sights and sounds of nature.

Review the first four chapters, documenting moments when Janie finds meaning in nature. What other natural phenomena guide Janie on her journey? Students should write about the way the sun reflects Janie’s emotional state.



Homework

Read Chapters 5–6 (pp. 34–75). Ask students to pay attention to the street lamp in Chapter 5. How does the text suggest that this is more than an ordinary street lamp? How might such references to light be symbolic?

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Janie reads natural phenomena as indicators of her internal landscape. As a result, Hurston’s writing is thick with language that draws us beyond the literal descriptions of people, places, and events. Janie uses simile to describe her life “like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone.”



Discussion Activities

Divide your class into groups. Review Chapters 1–5 and list examples of figurative language. Pay special attention to the novel’s first page. How are these descriptions used figuratively: the road, ships, trees, the sun, eyes, time, God, dreams, judgment, speech, silence, and mules?

To verify student findings, list each group’s images on the board. Ideally, a lively debate will take place as some students may propose examples that might be taken literally.

To expand the discussion, use this unit to look at specific types of figurative language such as simile, metaphor, or personification.



Writing Exercise

Whether individually or within the same groups, ask students to find several instances when an image recurs figuratively. What deeper meaning does this repetition suggest?



Homework

Read Chapters 7–9 (pp. 76–93). How does Janie’s voice change?

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Use this class period to mark the development of three major symbols in the novel: the pear tree, the street lamp, and the mule.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Divide your class into groups. Ask them to outline the literal elements of the pear tree or street lamp before they discuss possible symbolic meanings. Have them present their ideas to the class and, if possible, develop them in a short essay.

The Pear Tree

Listen again to the first three minutes of Track 2 of The Big Read CD as Ruby Dee reads the “pear tree” passage from Chapter 2. Do you agree with Carla Kaplan’s and Azar Nafisi’s interpretations of this symbol? Janie has now journeyed through two unsatisfying marriages; notice when she does (or does not) remember the pear tree. For what is she searching? Do you think she will find it?

The Street Lamp

What does the street lamp in Chapter 5 communicate about the ideals of the Eatonville townspeople? Does it exemplify a control over nature that empowers the community? Why does Mrs. Bogle sing “Jesus, the light of the world” when the lamp is lit? What does Joe mean when he says: “And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp–wick let de light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine”?

The Mule

In Chapter 6, Bonner’s yellow mule stimulates the Eatonville men to “mule–talk.” How does this deepen the meaning of the mule, both literally and symbolically? How does Hurston capture the musical, imaginative talk of the townspeople in this scene? This talk also reflects “playing the dozens.” If you have time, students can research the history and evolution of “playing the dozens.”



Homework

Read Chapters 10–12 (pp. 94–115). What are the most significant changes in Janie after she meets Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods?

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Many readers consider this novel a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel. As Janie's external journey takes her through southern Florida and her three marriages, she finds her voice and learns to use it. In order to trace the development of Janie's character, use this lesson to explore Janie's transformation at two major turning points: her confrontation with Joe Starks (Chapters 7–8) and her meeting with Tea Cake (Chapter 10).

Discussion Activities

Replay The Big Read CD, Track 1 (12:06–15:42). Listen to Ruby Dee's reading of Janie and Tea Cake's first meeting. Consider Jerry Pinkney's commentary. Notice his illustration in the Reader's Guide on page 14. Is this the way students pictured this scene? Why or why not?

Have students map Janie's development from the young woman under the pear tree to her life as Mrs. Killicks, Mrs. Starks, and Mrs. Woods. How has she changed? How has she remained the same?

Writing Exercise

Have students write two pages to respond to one of these topics. Have them refer to the text to support their conclusions.

1. After Joe's funeral in Chapter 9, Janie faces her hatred of Nanny, who "pinched the horizon." Although she sees "mislove" around her, she finds a "jewel" within. What factors allow Janie to rediscover herself? Does her newfound freedom relate to her ownership of property? How does Janie define freedom in her new life?
2. How does Janie feel when she first meets Tea Cake? How is it significant that he teaches her to play checkers? Notice the return of the pear tree symbol (p. 106). What does Janie mean when she says Tea Cake is "a glance from God" and has "done taught me de maiden language all over"?

Homework

Read Chapters 13–16 (pp. 116–146). Reflect upon Janie's new life with Tea Cake. Why does her "soul crawl out from its hiding place"?

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

Hurston has made deliberate choices about how to structure and pace the series of events to demonstrate one black woman's experience in Florida. In this lesson, map the events of the story to begin to assess the artistry of storytelling. The discussion of two major turning points from Lesson 7 should prepare your students for these activities.



Discussion Activities

In small groups, students will map a timeline of the novel's major events. Define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. How does Hurston build the drama? Groups should present their timelines to the class, discussing any discrepancies along the way.

Show students the first or last fifteen minutes of *Oprah Winfrey Presents: Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005). What important plot points are omitted? How does the pacing of the plot differ from a novel to a film? How are these choices complicated when a screenwriter is adapting a novel for film? This analysis can be expanded by watching the entire film (90 minutes).



Writing Exercise

Ask students to write their own conclusion to the novel, based on what they have read thus far. Remind them that Janie narrates her story to Pheoby. Have students use at least one image or symbol to reach a happy, tragic, or ambiguous ending.



Homework

Read Chapters 17–20 (pp. 147–193). Ask students to consider the following questions: Why do you think Hurston chose her title? If you were required to change it, what title would you choose? What themes does your title suggest?

Lesson 9

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



This complex novel possesses many themes, but here are three to begin class discussion.

A Woman's Voice

1. What do Bret Lott, Azar Nafisi, and Alice Walker say about Janie's developing voice? Do students agree? Ask them to give supporting examples from the novel.
2. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or remain quiet?
3. How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's story? What is Janie's final advice to her best friend?

Race

1. On the CD, Carla Kaplan, Robert Hemenway, and Alice Walker discuss Hurston's folk voice and complex characters. Assess the accuracy of their opinions with evidence from the novel.
2. The novel's only explicit reference to Jim Crow laws appears in Chapter 19, when Tea Cake is forced at gunpoint to clear the hurricane wreckage and bury the dead. See Handout Three for details on Jim Crow laws. What role does Jim Crow play in the novel?
3. Why are white people omitted until the last chapters? How might this reflect Hurston's literary goals?

Religion

1. Voodoo and Catholicism influenced Hurston. How would you describe Hurston's idea of religion in the novel?
2. What might be the meaning of the novel's title? In what ways do the characters see and hear God? Does He answer their questioning?
3. In Chapter 17 Janie muses about the pious Mrs. Turner's idols and altars. The narrator says that "Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood." What does this mean?



Homework

Read the Afterword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Students should begin working on their essays. See the essay topics at the end of this guide. Turn in outlines at the next class.

10

Lesson 10

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

What elevates a novel to greatness? Ask students to list ten characteristics of a great novel. Ask students to identify ten reasons why *Their Eyes Were Watching God* might be considered a great American novel. Share these qualities with the class. Write all contributions on the blackboard, discuss them, and allow students to vote for their top five characteristics.

In his Afterword to the novel, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., asserts that Hurston's "work celebrates rather than moralizes; it shows rather than tells." What does he mean by this? Use the novel to support your ideas.

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Hurston employ, and why would she use a novel to express this voice? What does her voice reveal about her generation? Is it still relevant? If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a fictional novel rather than a speech or essay?

Writing Exercise

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist them with their outlines, ideas, and arguments. Have them partner with another student to edit rough drafts. For this editing, provide students with a list of things that they should look for in a well-written essay.

Homework

For the next class, students will turn in their essays and present their paper topics and interpretations to the class. Celebrate by participating in a Big Read community event.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novel. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. After years of polite submission to her male counterparts, Janie gains her voice in Chapters 7 and 8. Prior to her defiance of Joe, Janie observes the way Daisy, Mrs. Bogle, and Mrs. Robbins are treated by the men. These three Eatonville women provide caricatures—quick, stereotyped sketches—of what it means to be a black woman in this small Florida town. In what ways do these caricatures highlight a larger disrespect toward women? How do they show Janie's increasing difficulty with the way men judge women?
2. The elaborate burial of Bonner's mule draws on an incident Hurston recounts in *Tell My Horse*, in which the Haitian president orders an ornate funeral for his pet goat. Although this scene is comic, how is it also tragic? What is the relationship between mules and women in this novel, and how is this highlighted by the way Eatonville treats this mule?
3. In 1937, the novelist Richard Wright (*Native Son*) reviewed *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He argued: "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes 'the white folks' laugh.... The novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." How would you respond to his criticism?
4. What is the relationship between Janie's silent voice and her cloistered hair? What happens to Janie after "she tore off her kerchief and let down her plentiful hair" (Chapter 8)? How does her hair reflect her womanhood?
5. Compare Janie with Delia from Hurston's short story "Sweat". "Sweat" is one of the few stories Hurston published during the Harlem Renaissance. How do both stories demonstrate Hurston's use of black idiom?
6. If your class has read other novels with female protagonists, ask students to compare Janie Crawford to those heroines. What differences do you find among their endings?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, student assembly, or bookstore.

1. **Public Presentations:** Your students have now given a number of presentations about the novel's themes. Have students give their favorite presentation to a Big Read partner: a bookstore, literary organization, or library.
2. **Parent's Night:** Host parents for a Hurston celebration. Include music from Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, or King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Have students reenact their four favorite scenes from the novel. Have student visual artists create illustrations to assist parents in understanding the scenes and the historical moment. Have a number of students present their ideas about the novel, concluding with what they learned from this experience.
3. **Create a historical timeline** to display in your classroom. Use this as a way to explore the time in which Hurston lived. For a more specific focus, create a timeline of Harlem Renaissance events, including Hurston's contributions.
4. **Create a work of art** to serve as a new cover for the novel. Have a show of student work at a local bookstore or Big Read sponsor. As an alternative, have students create a new title for the novel and create a corresponding image.
5. **Invite an anthropologist** to guide students in collecting social and cultural data. Ask students to collect songs from their own cultural backgrounds. Work together to create a class songbook. Extend the project by having students determine how these songs reflect specific values.

Zora Neale Hurston: A Brief Biography

Now lauded as the intellectual and spiritual foremother to a generation of black and women writers, Zora Neale Hurston's books were all out of print when she died in poverty and obscurity in 1960.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston and her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. Her mother's death and father's remarriage led the outspoken Hurston to leave home at fourteen and become a wardrobe girl in an all-white traveling Gilbert and Sullivan operetta troupe.

She completed her education at Howard University in Washington, D.C., while supporting herself at a variety of jobs from manicurist to maid. Heeding her mother's encouragement to "jump at de sun," she arrived in New York in January 1925 with \$1.50 in her pocket. Two years later, Hurston had not only published four short stories, but also become one of the most popular and flamboyant artists of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance.

As the only black scholar at Barnard College, Hurston studied with the pioneering anthropologist Dr. Franz Boas. His encouragement, combined with a stipend of \$200 a month and a car from patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, allowed Hurston to complete much of her anthropological work in the American South. Her lifelong fascination with collecting, recording, and broadcasting the daily idiomatic communication of Negroes informed her seven books and dozens of stories, articles, plays and essays.

Her ambition also led to tension in her romantic relationships. Hurston married and divorced three husbands and, at age forty-four, fell in love with Percy Punter, who was twenty-three. When he asked her to forsake her career to marry him, she refused because she "had things clawing inside [her] that must be said." She fled to Haiti as an attempt to "smother [her] feelings" for him. She wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks "to embalm all the tenderness of [her] passion for him."

Despite the novel's 1937 publication, Hurston's lifelong struggle for financial security continued throughout the 1940s. Once, she even pawned her typewriter. The largest royalty any of her books ever earned was \$943.75. Since most were published during the Depression, she paid her bills through story and essay sales, advances on the books, and two Works Progress Administration jobs with the Federal Writers' Project.

In the 1950s Hurston remained devoted to writing, but white publishers rejected her books, in part because black literature was no longer considered marketable. Other complications followed, and her health seriously declined. Her anticommunist essays and denunciation of school integration increasingly alienated her from other black writers. After a stroke in 1959, Hurston reluctantly entered a welfare home, where she died penniless on January 28, 1960. Her grave remained unmarked until novelist Alice Walker erected a gravestone in 1973.

The Harlem Renaissance

Their Eyes Were Watching God was published in 1937, several years after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. But the novel should be read with the context of the “New Negro” in mind, since Hurston was an influential member of the Harlem literati.

Thousands of African Americans migrated north at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “between 1910 and 1920 New York’s black population increased by 66 percent, Chicago’s by 148 percent, and Philadelphia’s by 500 percent. Detroit experienced an amazing growth rate of 611 percent.” This exodus heightened black intellectual output in cities like New York and Chicago. While new industry (like Henry Ford’s automotive factories) supplied jobs to these new arrivals, artists within these communities gave voice to the new challenges of the African-American experience. Ralph Ellison captures this journey in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. In this story, the main character migrates from his boyhood south to New York City. An educated young man’s dreams transform as urban life brings betrayal and racial strife.

Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, became the center for African-American artists from 1910 to 1930. These artists produced an astounding array of internationally acclaimed works. Harlem Renaissance literary greats included poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston, writer Richard Wright, and political thinker W.E.B. DuBois. At the same time, a host of musicians would make an indelible mark on the evolution of American

music. These artists included Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, and Bessie Smith. Since racial prejudice dominated mainstream America, some artists, like actress and dancer Josephine Baker, met with more success in Europe. International audiences also provided artists with an opportunity to experiment more freely with their art form.

While American society was still segregated, artistic collaborations between blacks and whites would provide a foundation for improving interracial relations. Zora Neale Hurston, a trained anthropologist as well as novelist, called whites supporting this artistic movement “Negrotarian.” Jazz musicians from New Orleans to New York to California overcame racial differences to embrace potent musical collaborations. Literary works, plays, paintings, and political commentary provided all Americans with new, positive, and realistically complex images of the African American. As a result, there was great debate within African-American communities as to what would properly represent the race. W.E.B. DuBois rejected Bessie Smith’s music as inappropriate. Richard Wright and Alain Locke criticized Hurston’s use of language as failing African Americans by representing them as uneducated. The gusto and triumph of the Harlem Renaissance was fed precisely by tensions that forced artists to come to terms with new definitions of race made possible in and through a variety of art forms.

Jim Crow

Despite some legal changes after the Civil War, former slaves and their children had little assurance in the South that their freedoms would be recognized. When Hurston was a child in the 1890s, a system of laws and regulations commonly referred to as Jim Crow emerged. Most of the laws separated such public facilities as parks, schools, hotels, transportation, water fountains, and restrooms into “Whites Only” and “Colored.” Race-mixing laws deemed all marriages between white and black both void and illegal.

The term “Jim Crow” probably originated in 1830, when a white minstrel show performer first blackened his face and sang the lyrics to the song “Jump Jim Crow.” At first the term was no more derogatory than black, colored, or Negro, but soon it became a slur. Although using violence to subjugate blacks was nothing new in the South, its character changed under Jim Crow. Brutal acts and mob violence were common. Torture became a public spectacle. Railroad companies sold tickets to lynchings. Some white families brought their children to witness such violence, and body parts of dead victims were sold as souvenirs.

Hurston and Jim Crow

Hurston’s lifetime spans the Jim Crow era almost exactly. She often said in her autobiography and letters that she was “sick” of the “Race question,” and she tried to avoid it in her fiction. Nevertheless, Hurston was often the object of discrimination.

In the 1944 *Negro Digest*, Hurston published “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience,” an experience that took place in New York, not the South. Hurston needed medical treatment

that she could not afford. For over a year, she had been suffering from digestive problems. In 1931, Charlotte Osgood Mason, Hurston’s godmother, arranged for her to see a white doctor. But when Hurston arrived at the specialist’s office in Brooklyn, an embarrassed receptionist took her to a private examination room, a room with soiled towels, dirty laundry, and one chair.

To avoid the Jim Crow coaches during her southern folklore-collecting travels, Hurston and her brother John agreed that she should buy a car. The coaches were often poorly ventilated and dangerous for women traveling alone. In February 1927, she bought a used car for \$300 (with payments of \$26.80 a month), which she soon dubbed “Sassy Susie.”

In white motels and restaurants, Hurston could not escape the “aggressive intolerance” from white faces. Even when Hurston traveled with the famous white novelist Fannie Hurst, both women resorted to tricks to procure equal treatment for Hurston. Hurst records one occasion when she announced to the waiter, “The Princess Zora and I wish a table.” Hurston’s African attire inspired him to believe her, so he quickly seated them at the best table. But no tricks would allow white hotels to place Hurston anywhere other than servants’ quarters. To avoid this disgrace, sometimes she would sleep in the car if a colored hotel room could not be found.

Source: Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner’s, 2003.

Teaching Resources

Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner's, 2003.

A readable, detailed account of Hurston's life. Boyd not only accounts for the "dropped" decade of Hurston's life (1891–1901), but also provides a brief analysis of each novel. Teachers may find the end of Chapter 25 ("Mules, Men, and Maroons") and all of Chapter 26 ("A Glance from God") useful as they teach *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Hemenway, Robert.* *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Hemenway's biography—the first about Hurston—helped launch the Hurston revival.

Hurston, Lucy Anne, and the Estate of Zora Neale Hurston. *Speak, So You Can Speak Again: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.

Lucy Anne Hurston is Zora's niece. This is a great addition to a teacher's library, as it features a CD, historic papers, photographs, handwritten poems, and manuscripts (including the first few pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*).

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. New York: Harper, 1991.

This work diverges from the familiar pattern of recent autobiography: Hurston ignores such major historical events as the Depression and World War I. She is almost entirely silent on matters of race, politics, and education. She never mentions a single American president, and she hardly alludes to any of her three marriages. Critics often joke that this memoir is one of her best works of fiction.

Hurston only refers to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in two chapters. At the end of Chapter 11, "Books and Things," she claims that of all her books, this is the one she most regrets writing. In Chapter 14, "Love," Hurston mentions Percy Punter—the novel's muse—and her attempt to repress her love for him during her 1937 flight to Haiti.

Kaplan, Carla,* ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*. New York, Doubleday, 2002.

In contrast to her autobiography, Hurston's letters are politically savvy and unapologetically feminist. They demonstrate her self-awareness as a writer, though they say little about her published work or literary influences. As Kaplan says in the introduction: "Her letters showcase Hurston as writer, anthropologist, dramatist, teacher, celebrity, folklorist, and urbanite. They also reveal her less public personas: Hurston as wife, lover, sister, aunt, friend, entrepreneur, recluse, sailor, pet lover, gardener, and cook. Hurston was famously Janus-faced and has often been noted for dissembling and secrecy. But her letters are often startlingly—even brutally—honest" (p. 13).

Walker, Alice.* *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, 1983.

If you only have time to read one outside source, you will find these three essays interesting and informative. "Saving the Life That Is Your Own" (pp. 3–15) compares Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier (from *The Awakening*) to Hurston's Janie Crawford. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View" (pp. 83–92) and "Looking for Zora" (pp. 93–116), Walker recounts her discovery of Hurston's writings and later of her grave. This last essay was originally published in *Ms. Magazine*, propelling the Hurston revival.

* Featured on The Big Read CD for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



**"I shall try to lay my dreaming aside. Try hard,
But Oh, if you knew my dreams! My vaulting
ambition! How I constantly live in fancy in
seven league boots, taking mighty strides
against the world, but conscious all the time
of being a mouse on a treadmill. Madness
ensues. I am beside myself with chagrin half
of the time; the way to the blue hills is not on
tortoise back, it seems to me, but on wings. I
haven't the wings, and must ride the tortoise."**

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON

in a letter to playwright Annie Nathan Meyer

**“The wind came back with triple fury,
and put out the light for the last
time. They sat in company with the
others in other shanties, their eyes
straining against crude walls and their
souls asking if He meant to measure
their puny might against His. They
seemed to be staring at the dark, but
their eyes were watching God.”**

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON
from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

A great nation deserves great art.

